

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C7

THE WASHINGTON POST
13 September 1981

Jack Anderson

Reclaim Wrangel!

President Reagan has been accused of returning to the Teddy Roosevelt era of gunboat diplomacy by luring two of Muammar Qaddafi's planes to their doom in the Gulf of Sidra. He has even been faulted for pushing a little guy around—calling to mind the old Groucho Marx line, "Hey, you big bully, stop picking on that little bully!"

The president should be advised, meanwhile, that there is another spot where America has been pushed around. He could stir the red blood of all patriotic Americans by unfurling the banner, "Remember Wrangel Island."

It's an issue made to order for Ronald Reagan. By recognized rules of international land claims, Wrangel Island belongs to the United States. It was discovered by an American, and the first permanent settlement was established by Americans. Yet the Russians—during the administration of Reagan's favorite president, Calvin Coolidge—sent a gunboat to take the island and kick the American settlers out.

From time to time, some woebegone soul has cried out for the United States to reclaim the island. It sits in ice-bound splendor far above the Arctic Circle, inhabited mainly by polar bears, Arctic foxes, seals, lemmings—and a few frostbitten Soviet scientists.

The island's strategic value is undeniable: only 83 miles from the Siberian mainland, closer to the Soviet Union than Cuba is to Florida. It would make a dandy site to install some bewhiskered demagogue to assail and annoy the Soviet Union from across the ice.

The island, larger than Rhode Island and not to be sneezed at, was sighted by an unidentified British soldier in 1849, and was named in honor of Baron Ferdinand Petrovich von Wrangel by an American whaling captain in 1867.

But the actual, undisputed legal discovery—landing—was accomplished by an American in 1881. Capt. Calvin Hooper of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service rowed ashore, verbally claimed the island for the United States and planted an American flag.

The island was left to the polar bears until 1911, when two Russian ice-breakers landed and erected a 35-foot beacon. They quickly abandoned the island.

Three years later, a stronger American claim to Wrangel was established. An American explorer and Harvard man, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, became trapped in the ice floes and literally bumped into the island.

In 1916, Czar Nicholas II issued a proclamation claiming Wrangel and the entire Arctic for Russia. The United States paid no attention.

When Stefansson returned to civilization in 1918, he touted Wrangel Island enthusiastically as a breeding ground for Arctic wildlife. In 1921, he set up a hunting and trapping colony, and then departed. He sent a supply ship to administer to the colony, but it was delayed by ice. When it finally arrived in September 1923, only an Eskimo woman remained alive.

Nevertheless, the little colony was revived, and the following year three Coast Guard ships arrived with supplies for the thriving fur enterprise.

No sooner had the Coast Guard departed than a Soviet gunboat, *Red October*, steamed up to Wrangel and forcibly evicted the Americans, ending the American occupation.

In 1941, the Soviets established a small scientific community on the island. It is still there.

Reagan could assure his place in history by taking the island back from the Russians. He might arrange for some Eskimos, say, to invite him to occupy the island, Afghanistan-style.

A timid policy toward Wrangel Island should only encourage the Russians to sneak up on another Arctic outpost, known as Svalbard, legal property of the Norwegians.

Declares a top-secret CIA assessment shown to my associate Dale Varatta: "The Soviets are undoubtedly aware of growing Norwegian concern about the situation of Svalbard and the increasing inclination to adopt a tough line on Soviet encroachments. They appear to be testing Norway's willingness to enforce the sovereignty to which it is legally entitled..."

Maybe all the White House needs is to rework the old Reagan slogan on the Panama Canal, to fit Wrangel Island: "We found it; we settled it; it's ours."

© 1981, United Feature Syndicate, Inc.